DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 275 604 SO 017 658

AUTHOR Vallance, Elizabeth
TITLE The Subject-Matters of Art and Art Criticism.
PUB DATE Apr 86
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (67th, San Francisco, CA, April 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - General (140)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Aesthetic Education; *Aesthetic Values; *Art Appreciation; *Art Education; Art History; Cultural Enrichment; Elementary Secondary Education; Museums
IDENTIFIERS Nation at Risk (A)

ABSTRACT

Increased attention to the importance of the arts in general education demands that we carefully define what we mean by "art" when we argue that it should be included in the school curriculum. Education in the arts has traditionally meant education in the making of art, but while only a few students will go on to produce artistically in later life, most students will see art and will have aesthetically-grounded experiences throughout their lives. Therefore an emphasis on education in it can serve at least 2 purposes: it can serve as a communication vehicle between critic and audience, helping the viewer better to see the work and understand its impact; we call this portrayal criticism. Art criticism may also intend to persuade the reader/viewer of the critic's judgment of the work; we may call this persuasive criticism. Both portrayal and persuasive criticism serve a purpose in education, and they serve different purposes in the K-12 classroom setting and the more informal museum education setting. Effective arts educators will use both portrayal and persuasive criticism, tailoring each to the different backgrounds and motivations of their audiences. (Author)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED275604

THE SUBJECT-MATTERS OF ART AND ART CRITICISM

BY

ELIZABETH VALLANCE

APRIL 1986

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Elizabeth Vallance

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

SO 017 458

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Subject-Matters of Art and Art Criticism

by Elizabeth Vallance
The Saint Louis Art Museum

Presented at annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April 1986. Session # 11.08.

ABSTRACT

Increased attention to the importance of the arts in general education demands that we carefully define what we mean by "art" when we argue that it should be included in the school curriculum. Education in the arts has traditionally meant education in the making of art, but while only a few students will go on to produce artistically in later life, most students will see art and will have aesthetically-grounded experiences throughout their lives. Therefore an emphasis on education in art criticism seems appropriate. Art criticism can serve at least two purposes: it can serve as a communication vehicle between critic and audience, helping the viewer better to see the work and understand its impact; we call this portrayal criticism. Art criticism may also intend to persuade the reader/viewer of the critic's judgment of the work; we may call this persuasive criticism. Both portrayal and persuasive criticism serve a purpose in education, and they serve different purposes in the K-12 classroom setting and the more informal museum education setting. Effective arts educators will use both portrayal and persuasive criticism, tailoring each to the different backgrounds and motivations of their audiences.

The Subject-Matters of Art and Art Criticism

by

Elizabeth Vallance
The Saint Louis Art Museum

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, April 1986. Session #11.08

The recent increase in attention to the legitimacy of art in the schools is heartening indeed, almost heartening enough to encourage us to temporarily put aside our legitimate terror at the current facts of budget cuts. The rhetoric at least is reassuring, and for the first time in a long time -- or perhaps it only seems that way to me, since I am only recently directly embroiled in the dialogue -- American educators are again talking about the arts.

I had scarcely expected the rather staid and traditional educators guiding the report called A Nation at Risk to give much shrift to the arts, particularly in this age of high technology, computer literacy, "the basics", and an occasional reference to "visual literacy" that always makes me nervous since somehow it doesn't sound very aesthetically based. But A Nation at Risk does address the arts rather sincerely, declaring that "the high school curriculum should also provide students with programs requiring rigorous effort in subjects that advance students' personal, educational, and occupational goals, such as the fine and performing arts and vocational education. These areas complement the New Basics, and they should demand the same level of performance as the Basics" (ANAR, p. 26). While we'll all quibble with lumping the fine arts with vocational education, we can at least appreciate the mention. And while we should scarcely be surprised that the Getty people, rooted in a millionnaire's art collection and blessed with more resources than most of us can imagine, should devote so many of these resources to something so bedrock as art education,

still the Getty's call for "discipline-based art education" comes at a time when we need this antidote to computer literacy. It is welcome at least for that reason alone.

Periodic surveys by affiliates of Louis Harris tell us amazing things such as that 81% of the American public feel it is important to have "more and better arts and cultural facilities for both the performing and visual arts" and that 80% feel that "the arts just give you pure pleasure to experience or participate in", and that 59% would gladly pay $15 more a year in taxes to assist the arts. We are told that 60% of the public has attended an exhibition in an art museum in the past year. Ninety-three percent feel it is important for children to be exposed to the arts in school. (all figures from American Council for the Arts 1981).

So we find ourselves in a climate which at least purports to value the arts and which frequently does so as a necessary balance to the pressures of technology and its educational exigencies. Those of us who are committed to art education in the schools and in other forums can only be gladdened by the current atmosphere which, if it is not <u>funding</u> art education at staggering levels, at least purports not to denigrate its importance.

What art education <u>is</u>, however, is not always clear. Most of us have a dim memory of the occasional weekly art lesson in elementary school, the perhaps-mandatory one semester of art/chorus/band in high school (I remember fondly a certain strange Miss Nunn, balancing on one foot on a tabletop as a model to students who'd scarcely begun the basics of drawing), a field trip or two to a symphony concert or art museum if we lived within reach of a city. That rather vague and unstructured sampler of participation in or watching of the "doing" of art was about it for most of us "of a certain age". I believe this remains the stereotype of "art education" to much of the public. Art education has

tended to mean, by and large, exposure to working with one or more media in the arts, enough to gain a generalized awe for the difficulty of doing art very well and -- sadly -- enough for most of us to emerge from the 12th grade not really knowing very much about art.

But there is so much more to art education, as those of us know who survived those early encounters and were fortunate enough to stumble into, perhaps, a good art history or philosophy-of-aesthetics course in college or who -- like the late Alfred Frankenstein, long the art critic for the San Francisco Chronicle -- never took an art course of any kind in his life but did have almost daily access to the Art Institute of Chicago as a child. There is more to learning about art than learning to do it. Most of us will not actively seek to make art in our lifetimes (although, as the Getty report of 1985 points out, all of us make daily decisions involving style, taste, design), but all of us have daily contact with visual stimuli that deliberately (in package design or fashion or good buildings) or accidentally (a pattern of leaves on snow, or unexpected bright color against a faded doorway) appeal to our aesthetic sense, cause us to slow down and take note, offer a bit of visual order in the bustle of the everyday. All of us do have to see and all of us do make judgments about artfulness or aesthetic appeal of items in our visual world.

It is only reasonable, therefore, if we do truly want to make the arts accessible to all citizens, to include -- even to emphasize -- art criticism as a subject-matter in education. This is not to deny the importance of creative skills, of the intellectual and design skills required to create a satisfying image: as a photographer I can tell you that despite my love of words, I feel no greater satisfaction, no more complete high, than when I am composing a photograph that I know will be good: there is a wholeness, a sense of balance,

a focusing (literally), a selecting and framing that at least equal the satisfaction I get from encountering an acknowledged masterpiece by, for example, Georgia O'Keeffe, who died the day I am writing these words. While creating a visual work offers a satisfaction unlike any others, it is not necessary to create in order to experience the richness of the visual arts. But it is necessary to be able to see well, to understand, to come to judgments on one's own. And, as I am finding in my work in an art museum, seeing well and being confident in one's ability to enjoy a work of art on one's own is an essential ingredient in overcoming the intimidation that an exhibition may present to the untutored. Being comfortable with art criticism -- with coming to one's own judgments and knowing why -- can make the visual world accessible in the richest sense. Art criticism can thus be seen as a defensible basic in the school curriculum.

This is not a new notion, not by far; others have argued it far more eloquently than I have here (Eisner 1972 , for example). My task here is less to argue for art criticism in the curriculum -- since we are gathered here under at least a grudging willingness to consider it -- than with placing art criticism into some useful context as a subject-matter in the curriculum.

In arguing what conceptions of art criticism are available as curricular subject-matter, let me start my saying what art criticism is not, as a point of clarification. I'll use the Getty Center's formulation of the four disciplines of their proposed "discipline-based" art education schema as a starting point. The Getty report (Getty Center, 1985) argues for art education based in four disciplines: creation (which I have addressed briefly above), art history, aesthetics, and art criticism. We see how art criticism is different from the creating of art. It is also different from art history as a discipline: art

history is concerned with the artists, the functions of art and the cultural context in which works of art were made, and how and why art has changed over time. Art history helps us to understand the timeline of the evolution of styles and to see works of art as living artifacts of the past; it does not seek to judge or explain a work as an autonomous piece independent of its own history. More difficult to distinguish from art criticism is the discipline of aesthetics, which like art criticism is concerned with the visual form of individual works but which is more concerned with understanding the aesthetic response itself than with explaining any individual work. Aesthetics seeks to define what "art" is and how the aesthetic experience differs from other kinds of experiences. The Getty Center seeks to create art curricula derived equally from all four disciplines, and I do not quibble with that approach here (or perhaps even at all). But I will be addressing only one of those four disciplines and as such am already limiting my conception of the visual arts as a curricular area. I concede that this is a limitation, but it seems a useful one and scarcely a narrow one, since art criticism is plenty big enough for all of us.

Purposes of art criticism -- and curricular implications

Aestheticians have written surprisingly consistently about the processes of criticism, it being hard to deny that effective art criticism requires the description of the work of art in question, some analysis of how its parts fit together, and ultimately a judgment as to how well it seems to work. Indeed, John Dewey argued that criticism cannot be separated from the process of assessment: "Criticism", he writes, "is judgment" (Dewey 1934). The one cannot exist without the other. And criticism of visual works must somehow communicate the work in question in the language of words -- must, that is, describe. There seems to be relatively little disagreement over the steps one must go through

in doing criticism, though some aestheticians may stretch the three-step process to five or more. The beginning and end points are the same: see the work, and judge it.

The purposes of doing so, however, are argued variously. And I shall argue here that the varying purposes of art criticism suggest different uses of art criticism as a subject-matter of the curriculum. Furthermore, the curricular implications of the various intents of criticism will vary according to whether the curriculum in question is that of the school -- required, structured, built around other more "academic" subject matters -- or that of a non-school institution where attendance is voluntary, specifically sought, and independent of any structure mandated by the educational establishment. In the remaining pages of this paper I will briefly examine the curricular implications of two opposing views of the purposes of art criticism, in the context of the public school curriculum and in the context of the programs offered by a public art museum.

Two alternative "subject-matters" of art criticism are: 1) art criticism as a vehicle of communication between critic and other viewers, where the intent is to help the other viewers (presumably less knowledgable about art than the critic) to see the work of art more fully, as the critic sees it. 2) art criticism as a tool that seeks to persuade the viewer of the critical value of the work according to some pre-determined aesthetic standards, that seeks to argue a particular judgment; this view sometimes gets attached to a more general concern with elevating taste and improving the standards of the general population. I shall call these two approaches the portrayal and the persuasive approaches. The labels are intended to be neutral. Both are equally valid under the right conditions. And each posits a different and legitimate role for the critic or teacher -- as translator/guide and arbiter/judge, respectively.

Criticism as portrayal. The most direct and ostensibly most objective role of criticism is that espoused by Sontag (1966) and Kozloff (1968) among others, these being two of the most articulate of the proponents, and by Stolnitz (1960) and Greene (1968) as well. According to this view, the purpose of criticism and the role of the critic is to serve as a bridge between the work of art and the relatively untutored viewer, to help the viewer to slow down and see what the work includes, to translate the messages presented in a language the viewer may not understand (i.e., paint on canvas, or line drawings) into a language he or she has access to, namely the language of everyday life. In Kozloff's apt terms, the critic "renders" the work of art into terms the viewer can understand, providing access to the work in a way the viewer's own visual experience might not allow. The role of criticism is to "reveal new facets" of the work in question (Kozloff), to help the viewer to see patterns or rhythms otherwise invisible. Stolnitz argues that many readings of a given work of art are possible, and that its aesthetic character is not "decided once and for all" by the creative shaping by the artist but rather open to the perception of the viewer according to several diverse interpretations that may all be "sound". There is no "right" way to see a work of art; there are instead several ways to "see" it, and each can be enriching.

I offer an example from the art museum where I work. We recently acquired a large new painting by the contemporary American artist, Roy Lichtenstein, perhaps seven feet by nine feet or more, painted last summer. It is thus a relatively "late" work by this artist best known by many of us as a pop artist whose images for years derived from the bold processed graphics of the comic books ("Oh, Brad..."). This new painting is entitled "Sailboats", and is constructed of a series of bold pop-art brushstroke-shaped shapes (too big for

most brushes) in primary colors against a bright white ground, cheerful in color but, at first glance, abstract in subject. Looking again, however, we can find this painting exciting either sheerly for its bold exuberant colors (much as we might enjoy some of the late Matisse paper cut-outs), ignoring the alleged subject-matter altogether, or we might delight in discovering that in fact the image is one of brightly-colored sailboats viewed from somewhere on high and through a tree branch or two, a clever order imposed on a brilliant bed of brushstrokes. We can enjoy the painting from either point of view and, if we even dimly know of Lichtenstein's earlier work, we can also enjoy the obvious evolution from the early comic-book pop-art stage to this modern version of abstract expressionism. Any of these three readings may be "sound". Any of them helps us to see the painting more clearly, to find the order in this seeming cacaphony of color. The critic of the portrayal school will encourage this multiplicity of perspectives. The teacher will delight in students' discovery of one viewpoint after another, in the sheer "Eureka" excitement of seeing what is "really" there behind this apparently abstract form. And the teacher/critic of this persuasion will not also seek to impose judgments of value or worth on the work; such judgments, to the extent that they are acknowledged at all, may remain implicit. The critic still will have been successful in helping the viewer to see this work.

Persuasive criticism. If judgment may remain implicit for critics interested chiefly in portrayal, it is paramount to critics of the second group who seek to go beyond opening our eyes and to argue the aesthetic worth of the work as well. "Aesthetic judgment in the business of all art critics", says Foerster (1941): the "task is not to shape a symbol but to separate the elements, to distinguish, to explain, to classify, to compare and contrast, to weigh, to

reach a palpable conclusion, and for this rational task (the critic) needs a rational control of his (sic) philosophy" (p. 84). Where judgment is the primary task of criticism, a set of standards is required, standards against which any work is judged and which provide the context in which the work is viewed and even described. The persuasive critic seeks not only to help the viewer see the piece clearly, but to help him or her see it in the light of standards of judgment derived from somewhere outside the work and applied consistently to this work and to others in the critic's sphere. This is a view of criticism that surfaces less frequently than the first in the writings of aestheticians, but it is a view clearly reflected in the writings of contemporary critics, as we can see in a quick perusal of the art/theater/movie/music reviews in any local newspaper. The critic not only tries to reveal what the work included, but also explicitly to judge its effectiveness. Stanley Kauffman's recent review of "Hannah and her Sisters" in The New Republic makes it plain that he did not like the film, and he compares it (for reasons mysterious to me) to the film "Wetherby" because he found the latter's development of character to be more complete and "Hannah" therefore wanting. Kauffman's reaction to Woody Allen's latest is colored by some standards he has set for the development of character; his review seeks to persuade us of the movie's failings along these lines, quite a different task from another review which might have tried to illuminate the relationships among the various characters to help us see the patterns there, quite ignoring comparisons to some ideal.

Most criticism which we encounter in everyday life -- in the weekly newsmagazines, in the newspapers, in the popular press -- is of this sort, explicitly judgmental and offered as such so that we might use this information in our own decisions whether to go to the film/play/exhibition. The intent of this criticism

is to persuade, to facilitate not our own judgment about the work (though that too) but often to facilitate our own decision whether or not to subject ourselves to the experience at all. Whether or not "the reviews were good" is valuable in a practical sense. Good reviews -- reviews that persuade potential audiences of the worth of a work -- will attract crowds; "bad" or unfavorable reviews will keep them away. I myself buy dozens of mystery novels in the course of a few months, many by writers I do not otherwise know: and I look for excerpts from "good reviews" in deciding which paperbacks to carry home. We often need persuasive reviews, and we learn in time which reviewers to trust -- which reviewers seem to apply the same standards we apply -- and indeed to attend a movie precisely because the local critic hated it. We learn to use persuasive reviews. They help us to act quickly.

If we consider criticism as a metaphor for or analogue of teaching, then we can ask how the varying role of the critic in the above approaches parallels the varying role of teacher implied by them. That is one way to approach the connection between art criticism and the subject-matters of curriculum.

But much more direct and useful for the purposes of this symposium is the straight question of how we might incorporate the art of art criticism as a subject-matter itself in the curriculum. Art criticism is a subject rarely broached in the school curriculum (though the Getty report did find seven model schools where it is used successfully, if not always called by name), and as such it offers some refreshing new starting points for exploring the inherent complexities of subject-matter. That is, art criticism, not presently enmeshed in decades of tradition as a subject dealt with in this or that fashion or at this or that grade level, has the mixed blessing of being relatively unknown to the school curriculum and therefore unencumbered by preconceptions or fixed boundar-

ies. To introduce art criticism into the curriculum would be to start fresh with a subject-matter whose full complexity could be respected by educators willing to take it on.

Let us look at the curricular possibilities of art criticism in the two categories roughly identified here -- and let us further complicate the issue by looking both at the school curriculum and at a museum education program in the arts (that is, school and non-school). The curricular implications of each approach to criticism vary considerably according to the context in which they are played out. I offer here some examples.

Art criticism and the school curriculum

Art is scarcely a high priority in most school curricula. Indeed, it is a rare elementary school that has its own full-time art teacher at all, most having to share the "art specialist" with one or more other schools in the district, each thereby receiving some small portion of a fragmented multi-school "art curriculum". The situation is somewhat better at the secondary level, where schools are more likely to have an art teacher of their very own and even perhaps some minimum requirement of participation in an arts-related course (not always the visual arts). Even where art has some formal place in the curriculum, it usually takes the form of one or more classes offering instruction in the making of art -- drawing, ceramics, etc. Art criticism is not a standard subject-matter in the schools, and when used it is used -- often quite appropriately -- as an adjunct to the business of creating. It serves a good function at this level. But it misses the opportunity to offer to all students -- even to those clearly inept at making art and uninterested in it -- an introduction to the excitement of enjoying the works of art made by others. To the artistically illiterate graduates of the schools, a college art history course might open the doors as

it did for me, making history come alive for the first time by presenting it through the artifacts of culture and gradually endowing these artifacts with an excitement of their own. But the insights that art history offers to the college student may depend on the student's already having some sense of history to anchor this to -- and definitely depends on the student's having made it as far as college and to an art history course as well. This route to the appreciation of the visual arts is not for everyone. I count myself as fortunate to have stumbled quite by accident into art history at the tender age of 19.

But criticism in its most basic form does not depend on prior knowledge of history. Criticism in the truest sense can build on the visual experience itself, tying the experience of a given work of art to many other qualities -- to other images in the culture, to stories, to subjects studied in the curriculum at the time, to children's own experience with drawing and painting. Criticism requires seeing and it requires a willingness to make connections between the work and the visual traditions of each viewer. It can start from scratch.

As such, the two categories of criticism sketched above would have two quite different roles in the school curriculum. Portrayal criticism, while enriching and valuable for all audiences -- and indeed perhaps especially valuable for very sophisticated audiences who do not need and might even resent the direct judgments of a critic -- may be especially appropriate as an introductory approach to understanding the visual arts. Though judgment may be the ultimate end point of all criticism, and may even be inevitable to it, portrayal criticism seeks chiefly to reveal the aesthetic qualities of the work -- for example -- the delightful sailboats in Lichtenstein's abstract-looking set of large brushstrokes, -- rather than to come to judgment about them. Judgment may indeed be unavoidable, but to come to a judgment and to announce it even to oneself may require

more confidence than the average student has about his or her ability to contemplate a modern painting. The teacher analogue to the art critic here is the translator, the guide, the bridge between the familiar (perhaps a comic book) and the unfamiliar (perhaps this strange large painting that looks vaguely like a comic-book image), one who can help the student see the connections and find the "aha!" of recognizing them. Portrayal criticism might be in fact the bridge between the student's regular curriculum and later more systematic study of the visual arts.

Portrayal criticism could work effectively as a bridge with or without a curriculum slot assigned specifically to it. There need not be an "art criticism period" in the school day, and in fact the enriching value of portrayal criticism may best be developed as a routine and unremarkable part of the social-studies curriculum (looking at images of ancient Egypt, perhaps, and at examples of Egyptian Revival movie theaters from 1930's America). A teacher integrating portrayal criticism into a reading lesson might merely introduce a Grandma Moses townscape and allow elementary students to explore it as a possible illustration of a story recently read, indentifying the elements of the painting and discussing why it does or does not depict the town portrayed in the story. Portrayal criticism asks only ("only"!) that students try to <u>see</u> the work and to make sense of it. Granted that seeing well is an art in itself, we can argue that seeing well is also a basic skill that can be incorporated into any other subject matter at any level ("in an intellectually respectable form", too, with all due respect to Bruner).

Persuasive criticism presumes more. It asks more of the teacher -- whose task as critic is to develop a line of argument, organizing the perceptual facts in a way that leads to the judgment offered and defends it, building a case

and helping the students to do the same. Where portrayal criticism can be incidentally dropped into a lesson on another subject, used illustratively or incidentally without violating its basic principles, persuasive criticism by its nature demands both a focus and room to grow. We must attend to it. We must give time to reading a movie review by Pauline Kael because she is trying to justify a critical judgment and we need all the evidence she is marshalling. Likewise the act of persuasive criticism of a painting needs calm attention, selecting visual elements and developing a theme that relates them to a defensible judgment about their effectiveness. And it requires an explication and an elaboration of standards. Even the stereotypical "They call that a painting? A monkey with a paint pot could do that!" (I actually overheard this comment in a gallery one day) is a kind of persuasive criticism, a statement of value, evidence that the viewer has singled out a work, paid it some attention, and assumes his audience shares his standards. Persuasive criticism need not take a great deal of time. But it must refer to standards, even implicitly (the implication in the above is that monkeys can't possibly paint great paintings -- probably a fair assumption, but an aesthetic standard nonetheless), and for that reason is likely to be less useful at introductory levels than is portrayal criticism. I think a first-grade class might be lead through a portrayal criticism of Lichtenstein's "Sailboats" picture and to see it better therefore; I do not think it fruitful for a first-grade class to attempt to judge this painting. Older students, able to see the connections between the painting and the comic-book tradition, and exposed by now to abstract images also, should be better able to judge its effectiveness by reference to both.

In either event, the uses of art criticism as a subject matter in the school curriculum are likely to be as a twist to the "regular" curriculum. It is unreasonable to expect, in this budget climate and the present emphasis on high technology, for art criticism to emerge as a subject matter in its own right, edging out physics or driver education in the process. The subject-matters of art criticism in the school curriculum are likely to be as enrichment. Because art criticism is indeed enriching, this use of the subject-matter in this setting may be perfectly appropriate.

Art criticism at the art museum

Any institution where attendance is not mandatory and whose educational program is not bound by state or local regulations is, of course, in a quite different position and is free to shape its curriculum according to the principles of public service, audience appeal, or continuing education which may guide it. And needless to say, an art museum imposes far different conditions on the teaching of art criticism than does the school curriculum. In the largest sense, the teaching of art criticism is the whole purpose of an art museum: to the extent that the museum seeks to invite the general public to see and enjoy its collections and special exhibitions, the art museum seeks to help the public to become "critics". The museum may do this more or less directly -- implicitly or scarcely at all by simply mounting the exhibitions and the minimally necessary labels, far more explicitly through classes, sequenced public lectures, and other programs.

Thus in one sense the subject-matter of art criticism is far easier to address in an art museum. It is complicated, however, by the fact that the audience is neither captive and regular nor or a predictably homogeneous age or background. Museum educators developing a lecture series on a special exhibition must assume

that their "audience" covers high-school students through retired professionals, that any one member of the audience may come to only one lecture or to the entire series. That the audience is at the museum at all, much less attending a special program, suggests a commitment to the visual arts already higher than that of the average fourth-grader, but this audience is diverse. Some of its members have travelled to all the world's great museums and seem to check in with the home base between trips; others have never been to an art museum before and need to be reassured that art can make sense to them. The art museum setting both brings some assumptions to the task of teaching criticism and enlarges the difficulty by being even more broadly "public" than the schools. The art museum teacher works with the end products of as many different art-education curricula as there are people in the audience.

Portrayal criticism in this setting may serve quite a different role than it does in the school. Where in the school curriculum portrayal can be a convenient starting point, in the museum it remains a constant challenge. The man incensed about the monkey-and-the-paint-pot picture (actually a wonderful abstract work by Philip Guston) is making a judgment, but it is likely that he has not taken the prior step of looking carefully at the work to see what is really there. Portrayal criticism -- an approach that requires slowing down to see -- in a museum setting often must first overcome the prejudices and defenses against the unknown that modern art especially seems to engender. Portrayal criticism must first cut through the persuasions that the audience may already have reached, often on a general basis quite apart from any particular work. People do come to museums with preconceptions: we know from watching attendance figures and listening to comments in the galleries that people enter a museum prepared to love the Impressionists, prepared to be impressed by the

Old Masters and by the 19th-century trompe l'oeil masters, prepared to enjoy landscapes and prepared to be outraged by abstract modern art. They come with their persuasions intact, quite often. The task of museum education in criticism is to peel back these preconceptions and help this variously-educated public to see the works in their own terms again. Portrayal criticism is the biggest and most basic job of museum educators because the public does not start with the clean slate that would facilitate seeing. And it is a big job also because the first responsibility of the education program of an art museum -- especially a tax-supported public art museum -- is to help the general public to feel comfortable with art. Art is intimidating, and it is especially intimidating to adult citizens who have grown up knowing that they don't know much about art and that they are simply mystified by much of it. Museum education programs must seek to demystify the arts, and it is imperative that they provide among all their other resources the means to help the public calmly and enjoyably to see what is there. It is difficult to see a work by Jackson Pollack if your perception is clouded by some kind of outrage that spilled paint could cost so much money. One need not come to love Pollack's work. But one should be freed to see it for itself. Portrayal criticism can serve this function.

Persuasive criticism serves quite a different role in museum education than does portrayal criticism, and definitely a different role from either one in the school setting. Museums are staffed by people well educated in the arts, by curators whose job is to make judgments in purchasing and exhibiting art works, by art historians and educators who love certain parts of the collection and want the public to love them too. The staff have made aesthetic judgments every day and they get paid to do so. Likewise, many of the patrons of the museum are at least equally well educated in the arts, erudite people bitten by the

art bug early in life and nurturing this wonderful addiction in the course of careers as accountants or housewives, people who even collect art seriously. Judgments, for these people, are not inappropriate. Judgments even invite lively argument and discussion. Judgments and the persuasive criticism that embodies them are a necessary stimulus for these people. Indeed, judgment and discrimination in the arts are the ultimate goal of museum education: while the most basic goal is to help people to see, ultimately we want people to see discriminately, not to like everything equally merely because they can see what's there. We want people to become connoisseurs and to have access to the deep reward of loving a painting and knowing why. And since art museums are all about the choices that collectors have made, persuasive criticism serves an important role in the museum setting. It empowers the public to make its own aesthetic decisions.

It is worth mentioning that persuasive criticism sometimes gets very hot. We have seen this recently in the controversy over Richard Serra's aggressively large and rusty pieces of public sculpture, threatened with removal in New York and barely escaping a public vote in St. Louis. Some people simply hate these works, and make the -- amazing, to me -- leap that therefore the works should be removed. The argument over public sculpture often appears to take the form of schools of persuasive criticism lining up on opposing sides trying to persuade the public. Whether all this dialogue is really "criticism" is a question, for it rarely takes the form of a careful analysis of the work, concentrating instead on the outrage of its very presence or on aspects only tangentially related to the work's aesthetic qualities (such as its potential for graffiti). The point is that the public does on occasion become embroiled in matters requiring aesthetic judgment and pretending to reflect it. Because of the public nature of some works of art, and because of the public's tendency to react strongly to "art"

(odd that practical things like buildings rarely engender such controversy over design), the museum's responsibility to help educate the public to make good aesthetic judgments is large.

Some conclusions

I've really only skimmed the surface here, but I hope I have demonstrated something of the complexity of the subject-matter we so generally call (though we don't do it often enough) "art criticism". I've broken art criticism down into two crude camps, and this dichotomy scarcely does justice to the practice of criticism. It does, however, begin to illustrate the difficulty of defining art criticism or of fixing its purported role in the curriculum were it to be introduced regularly. Likewise, the dichotomy between the school curriculum and the informal curriculum of an art museum is a somewhat extreme distinction, but it too begins to illustrate the difference in student characteristics we must address if we are to address art criticism responsibly as a teaching field.

The subject-matter of art criticism is infinitely complex. Having done it so little in the school curriculum, we cannot claim to know much about the forms it might take as a subject-matter of the curriculum. But I suspect that one elemental reason art criticism is not addressed in the curriculum is its very complexity. Art seems hard to understand and criticism seems to be an arcane field limited to those who have mysteriously mastered the lingo and understand things the rest of us can't begin to fathom. Art criticism seems to partake of fine distinctions not accessible to those of us who may not know much about art but know what we like. We as a culture have largely abdicated the role of critic to those who are confident enough to assume it for themselves; we have not been educated well enough to know how to challenge the apparent primacy of the erudition of critics, and as a result we have ceded the right to judge

to these few and have shunned the responsibility to make our own aesthetic judgments.

Portrayal criticism is a necessary first step toward empowering the public to be part of the tradition of the visual arts. It can be used, I think, very fruitfully in the schools; it must be used in museum education programs if first-time visitors to the art museum are ever to come back. Persuasive criticism is ultimately what we all want to be able to do for ourselves and for our friends: we want not only to know how to see the new Lichtenstein after all the publicity about it, but we would feel much better if we could also explain to our friends why we like it or not. We need to be able to persuade, at least in our own minds, even if it does not lead to irate letters to the editor about the local Serra sculpture. Schools may be able to help in this task, if sufficient time could ever be devoted to the visual arts. Museums are obligated to do so.

References

Dewey, John Art as Experience (New York: Capricorn Books, Putnam's 1958. Original 1934)

Eisner, Elliot Educating Artistic Vision (New York: Macmillan Company 1972)

Getty Center for Education in the Arts Beyond Creating: The Place for Art in America's Schools (Los Angeles: Getty Center for Education in the Arts, April 1985)

Greene, Maxine Art, technique, and the indifferent gods. Teachers College Record, 70, 256-261, December 1968

Kozloff, Max Renderings: Critical Essays on a Century of Modern Art (New York: Simon & Schuster 1968)

National Commission on Excellence in Education, A Nation at Risk: the Imperative for Educational Reform (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 1983)

National Research Center of the Arts, Inc. Americans and the Arts (New York: American Council for the Arts, 1981)

Sontag, Susan Against Interpretation (New York: Dell 1966)

Stolnitz, Jerome Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin 1960)